

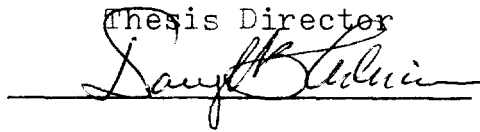
Teaching Early American Poetry
through the Integration of the Arts

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Angela J. Beumer

Thesis Director

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "David H. Collins", is written over a horizontal line.

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

April 1991

May 1991

How many teenagers are truly interested in seventeenth century Puritan poetry? Rarely do students show interest for the older and more unfamiliar aspects of literature. For this reason, I have devised an alternative method to teaching early American poetry. While enrolled in an English methods course, I became aware of the challenge to relate literature to the students. I have planned, choreographed, performed, and video recorded a dance interpretation of Anne Bradstreet's poem, "Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House." In addition to traditional classroom instruction, this video can enhance the understanding of the poem itself.

The teaching of poetry has proven to be a pedagogical problem for teachers for decades. The integration of the arts, namely poetry and dance, may clarify certain concepts or symbols of poetry by providing a visual image which correlates with the poem. Simply put, the dance is another avenue through which to reach the student's mind.

Examples of the integration of the arts exist in popular as well as classical culture. For instance, cartoons and Music Television videos incorporate music, words, and movement. The chorus in Shakespearean plays provides a musical quality to the poetry. Dancers and choreographers have employed classical literature in dance, such as Martha Graham's Cave of the Heart, based on the myth of Medea, and Rudolf Nureyev's Othello, to express feelings and emotions. Much can be learned through integrating the arts; therefore,

the statement dulce et utile proves effective. This theory can be used to the advantage of students and classroom teachers.

New, innovative ideas in teaching methods can solve some of the problems classroom teachers experience, especially when teaching poetry. As Hale Chatfield states in Improving the Teaching of Poetry, our American poetry originates from the tenets of Puritanism (1). Few young people regard Puritanism as an exciting topic, and as a result, few students regard poetry itself as exciting. The poem I chose for this project, Bradstreet's "Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House," is a product of the early American Puritan beliefs on which American poetry is founded. Students today may not comprehend the conflicts of life which Puritans like Bradstreet struggled with daily. Thus, if students cannot understand the conflicts involved, they may not comprehend the poem as a whole. One such struggle is the spiritual world versus the material world. As Robert Richardson states in The American Puritan Imagination, it is necessary for Puritans to live balanced lives between the two worlds: one could not completely disregard this world because God created it, nor could they place all their emphases on the earthly world, thereby ignoring the spiritual world (105). Such dilemmas may be very confusing to students of today. Bradstreet's poem shows this dilemma by narrating the speaker's sense of loss from a fire which destroys all the speaker's worldly goods; yet, it strengthens the spirit of the speaker. God plays a role in every disaster, showing the victim He is the way to immortality according to the Puritan beliefs (Richardson 118).

Such problems in teaching and understanding poetry often reinforce negative attitudes in both students and teachers. As Chatfield states, American poetry, based on Puritanism, is often didactic (2). Rarely do these poetry lessons relate to human experience, a factor which is vital to teaching. Bradstreet's poem does relate the human loss from a fire; yet, her words may need to be clarified, which is one purpose of my dance interpretation. Many people view poetry as a mystery--something difficult and confusing that only literary scholars can understand and enjoy (Chatfield 11). Poetry must be made to relate to students' lives if it is to be comprehended and appreciated. Arthur Fairchild admits that "teaching poetry has always been a problem" in his book The Teaching of Poetry in the High School. Fairchild's book was published in 1914; unfortunately, the problem remains today. The problem of teaching poetry is timely, and innovative pedagogical experiments are in order if poetry is to be revived in the classroom.

One of the most important aspects of teaching poetry is to relate the material to student experiences. In a world of technology, students may be interested to watch a video of a modern dance interpretation of a seventeenth century Puritan poem. Poetry can literally come alive to the students. In Learning from the Inside Out, the authors provide examples of techniques to bring a fresh approach to ordinary material (Hoffman 7). For instance, the authors advocate the dramatization of poems to assist student comprehension (Hoffman 7). In other words, the students use movement to express words, as in role playing. The dance interpretation also uses movement

to convey a deeper meaning of words. As stated earlier, with early American poetry it is very important to teach the material on the student's level--to make it relate. Dramatization also employs collaborative learning. One student's enthusiasm can amazingly encourage other students (Carlson 71). Therefore, it is not a good idea to assign to students poems to work on alone, to demystify (Fairchild 71).

The dance interpretation of a poem fits neatly into one of the six approaches to teaching poetry in The Teaching of High School English: the personal approach. The emphasis of this technique is pleasure and personal growth (Hook 213). Again, this methods text encourages the dramatization of poems. The pleasure of poetry, according to J.N. Hook and William H. Evans, is the "language rhythm, story, emotional intensity, and pictorial qualities" it possesses (Hook 213). The dance interpretation also reinforces these pleasurable aspects of poetry.

However, students do not enjoy poetry that they cannot understand. The difficulty of relating poetry to the students has been acknowledged by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The organization has provided funds for an experiment in 1975 at Hiram College titled "Improving the Teaching of Poetry in Secondary Schools" (Chatfield 3). A three-week seminar was conducted to help teachers feel more comfortable teaching poetry. Many teachers feel inexperienced to teach poetry (Chatfield 11). The study recommends that school administrators remain open to interdisciplinary techniques of teaching poetry and other arts (Chatfield 10).

Many of the following suggestions for integrating the arts to teach poetry result from Hale Chatfield's book Improving the Teaching of Poetry on the Hiram College poetry study.

The dance interpretation of the poem will serve to bring the unfamiliar to a familiar level. Teachers may assume the students have a good background of information to help them understand poetry. Teachers may need to provide the student with such necessary background. Arthur Fairchild believes that the teacher should think in terms of the student's point of view in order to relate the poem to the pupil (9). Since dance and video technology are probably familiar to students, this is one way to connect the student to the early American poetry. Fairchild also states, "What the pupil usually lacks is the necessary imagery or information to make the poem intelligible to him" (72). The dance interpretation provides a concrete image that the student may have trouble conjuring in the imagination. Fairchild stresses the importance of the mental image to poetry, for a poem is a state of mind (107). A dance interpretation can inspire students to create their own personal interpretations, possibly through other means of expression. Even in 1914, Fairchild advocated dramatization to make the unfamiliar more familiar to the student.

In Learning from the Inside Out, Hoffman also emphasizes the use of the arts to connect familiar ideas with new concepts. In addition to dance and drama, Hoffman recommends the use of song and puppetry as well (6). These techniques make the material more human--it comes alive. This is a vital concept to the teaching of poetry.

Not only do artistic interpretations of literature familiarize the unfamiliar, but they also allow students to learn through the affective domain by encouraging divergent thinking (Hoffman 6). The main goal of such artistic activities is to encourage student interaction, response, and expression of feelings (Hoffman 27). One of poetry's intrinsic values is the emotion and feeling it can produce in its reader. The expressions and gestures of the dancer help to convey these feelings. Poetry is feeling, says Fairchild (107). The creative and analytic aspects of poetry can be clarified through artistic expression. Finally, interest can be perked up through a variety of methods employing expression.

Why, one may ask, is dance in particular helpful to the instruction of poetry? Quite simply, dance communicates. Similar to spoken language, dance conveys messages and symbolizes the concrete as well as the abstract. Students are familiar with many types of nonverbal communication, such as body language. For example, a clenched fist is almost always a sign of anger that needs no words to convey its meaning. Dance gestures can trigger a nonverbal connection to the poem in the student's mind. As Deborah Carlson states, dance is a natural form of expression, another connection with the familiar (62). Dance is meaning, and it can convey the meaning of a poem. Dance could also reveal the culture of a group, like folk dances, and Indian or African tribal dances (Carlson 62). Dance is physical and exciting. As Carlson believes, "Dance communicates because it stirs a response within us--an inherent sense of motion that empathizes with

the body." Dance is also a key to the humanities--the integration of the arts.

Communication is symbolic, as Edward Hall states in his book, The Silent Language (120). Dance provides an image of these symbols. The spoken word is an arbitrary symbol, just as dance uses symbols (Hall 120). In the dance interpretation to Bradstreet's "Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House," gestures symbolize feelings. For example, hands on both sides of the head represent anguish. Arms extended upward while looking upward can symbolize prayer or pleading. The head turned from an area with the arm pushing away symbolizes rejection. Hall notes that space also communicates, emphasizing open or closed spaces relaying feelings (190). A very open space may provide the feeling of isolation or loneliness. Hall states, "Spatial changes give a tone to a communication, accent it, and at times even override the spoken word (204). As in the dance interpretation, upstage left represents the burnt home of the speaker; whereas, downstage right represents the speaker's eternal home, heaven. The dancer is symbolically torn between the two corners, always wavering toward the home. Yet, by the end of the poem and dance, the dancer returns to the downstage right, symbolically looking toward heaven for guidance. Clearly, dance does communicate the Puritan struggle between the spiritual and physical worlds.

Both dance and poetry share certain artistic aspects, another advantage to employing dance and poetry as the integration of the arts. As just mentioned, both art forms employ symbolism.

Both poetry and dance contain rhythm. In poetry, accented syllables and meter provide rhythm. These accents are easily connected to the rhythm and dynamics of the dance (Carlson 64). Large, abrupt movements may represent stressed syllables. Other elements of dance relate directly to poetry, especially when read aloud. These elements include time, energy, and space (Carlson 62). Chatfield mentions that the meter of poetry often intimidates students. He recommends freedom of rhythm (Chatfield 11). Modern dancers also work against the natural beat, as in free verse.

Poetry is easier to explain when broken down into parts. Many of these components relate to dance, also. The dance interpretation of Bradstreet's poem emphasizes the imagery and narrative aspects of the poem. Dance provides a visual image of words, so the connotation in the poetry is made more clear. Imagery, appeals to the senses, is made concrete through the dance (Perrine 46). Similarly, metaphor, personification, and tone can be represented through dance. In Sound and Sense, Laurence Perrine differentiates meaning and total meaning. Meaning refers to the experience expressed; whereas, total meaning includes the tone and emotions that connect with the poem (Perrine 129). This total meaning is what the dance interpretation explores. A poem's musical devices ("verbal music"), arrangement, repetition, and variation are also easily interpreted and seen through dance (Perrine 155).

It is this experience of total meaning which brings poetry to life. Both poetry and dance rhythm are "related to the beat of our hearts, the pulse of our blood, the intake

and outflow of air from our lungs" (Perrine 168). These two innate acts can be integrated to improve the teaching of poetry.

In conclusion, I asked seniors from my student teaching classes at Delta High School, Muncie, Indiana, to provide feedback for my project. After a brief study of the poem and a viewing of the dance, the students stated that the video provided a concrete, tangible demonstration of the poem, which helped them understand the poem overall. They also understood the symbols the dancer attempted to convey. Finally, they agreed that the dance interpretation combatted negative attitudes toward poetry because the dance introduced creativity to the lesson. According to this group, the integration of the arts in teaching early American poetry proved successful.

"Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House"

In silent night when rest I took
For sorrow near I did not look
I wakened was with thund'ring noise
And piteous shrieks of dreadful voice.
That fearful sound of "Fire!" and "Fire!"
Let no man know is my desire.
I, starting up, the light did spy,
And to my God my heart did cry
To strengthen me in my distress
And not leave me succorless.
Then, coming out, beheld a space
The flame consume my dwelling place.
And when I could no longer look,
I blest His name that gave and took,
That laid my goods now in the dust.
Yea, so it was, and so 'twas just.
It was His own, it was not mine,
Far be it that I should repine;
He might of all justly bereft
But yet sufficient for us left.
When by the ruins oft I past
My sorrowing eyes aside did cast,
And here and there the places spy
Where oft I sat and long did lie:
Here stood that trunk, and there that chest,
There lay that store I counted best.
My pleasant things in ashes lie,
And them behold no more shall I.
Under thy roof no guest shall sit,
Nor at thy table eat a bit.
No pleasant tale shall e'er be told,
Nor things recounted done of old.
No candle e'er shall shine in thee,
Nor bridegroom's voice e'er heard shall be.
In silence ever shall thou lie,
Adieu, Adieu, all's vanity.
Then straight I 'gin my heart to chide,
And did thy wealth on earth abide?
Didst fix thy hope on mold'ring dust?
The arm of flesh didst make thy trust?
Raise up thy thoughts above the sky
That dunghill mists away may fly.
Thou hast an house on high erect,
Framed by that mighty Architect,
With glory richly furnished,
Stands permanent though this be fled.
It's purchased and paid for too
By Him who hath enough to do.
A price so vast as is unknown
Yet by His gift is made thine own;
There's wealth enough, I need no more,
Farewell, my pelf, farewell my store.
The world no longer let me love,
My hope and treasure lies above.

Anne Bradstreet

Works Cited

- Bradstreet, Anne. "Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House." The Harper American Literature. Ed. Donald McQuade. New York: Harper & Row, 1987. 176-77.
- Carlson, Deborah L. "May I Interest You in a Dance?" Learning from the Inside Out. Ed. Stevie Hoffman. Maryland: Association for Childhood Education International, 1989. 62-71.
- Chatfield, Hale. Improving the Teaching of Poetry. Ohio: Hiram Poetry Review Supplement No. 6, 1975.
- Fairchild, Arthur. The Teaching of Poetry in the High School. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914.
- Hall, Edward. The Silent Language. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959.
- Hoffman, Stevie. Learning from the Inside Out. Maryland: Association for Childhood Education International, 1989.
- Hook, J.N. The Teaching of High School English. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1982.
- Perrine, Laurence. Sound and Sense. 7th ed. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987.
- Richardson, Robert. "The Puritan Poetry of Anne Bradstreet." The American Puritan Imagination. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974.